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"What Would a Guy Do? Biggest Impediment to Alternate Work Arrangement Is Confidence to Ask for It"

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Texas Lawyer
September 23, 2002

Originally published in *TEXAS LAWYER*, September 23, 2002.

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Sometimes, my life reminds me of that scene in "Goodfellas," where Ray Liotta is rushing around town, trying to coordinate a massive drug deal, being tailed by feds in black helicopters and running the babysitter/drug mule back to her house so she can get her "lucky hat" (which she needs to ensure the safety of her trip), all the while supervising his brother's preparation of a massive Italian feast they planned for that evening.

Except for the drug part, that is my life.

And, from what I see of most women I know, it's their lives too. Handling the details of all our various lives—work, kids, home, marriage, social life, business development, community work, CLE, etc.—requires a juggling act fit for a three-ring circus.

On a recent (fairly typical) day, I was putting the final touches on a months-in-the-making real estate deal, taking part in a two-hour conference call with another client, handling a personnel matter, helping integrate my son into his new school, making sure he's eligible to play tennis, planning a dinner party and a closing dinner, buying groceries and attending my Pilates workout.

I'm used to it by now, but sometimes the details of life can be overwhelming. And, frequently, the juggling act becomes too much for some people.

I had lunch with a friend the other day, and she informed me that she was quitting her job to stay home with her kids. Having two full-time jobs is just too much, she said, and it's starting to take a toll on her.

Nevertheless, she told me, she's ambivalent about quitting the work world. In her mid-30s, she was making more money than she ever had before, she enjoyed her work, and she didn't exactly relish the prospect of spending her day devoid of adult companionship.

I asked her if she had tried to work out a part time option with her boss, and she said she hadn't.

"Why not?" I asked. "If you really don't want to quit your job, but you need more free time, why not try to get the best of both worlds?"

"To be brutally honest," she told me, "I didn't have the guts to do it."

As it turns out, despite the fact that she was fairly senior at her firm, had brought in several valuable clients and is generally good at what she does, she was afraid of proposing a massive over-haul of her job description, one that would have eased her stress level but allowed her to remain part of the workforce.

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Well, I have news for her: Like most things in life, the decision to "work" or "parent" isn't black and white anymore. Even in the legal profession, where it seems everybody is working 60-plus hours a week and anybody who veers off the partnership track is doomed to a life of professional mediocrity, there is room to chart your own course.

Yes, as in all things, there are tradeoffs. But if your job is stressing you to your limits, you never get to see your spouse and you're starting to burn out, aren't you already trading your mental and physical health for your professional status?

Shaping an alternate path, however, takes creativity, commitment, discipline and flexibility. It means looking at your job—and all its various components—with fresh, objective eyes. What parts of it can be delegated completely? What can be done from home? How can your job be structured in such a way that you get the flexibility you need but your firm gets its work done in the same way and at the same level of quality it is now?

Consult others who have restructured their work lives according to their priorities. You'll be surprised at how many you'll find once you start digging around—men and women, many of whom will tell you they now kick themselves for not charting their own course earlier.

Of course, there are all sorts of logistics to work out. Child care, office arrangements, insurance benefits, vacation time, co-worker resentment, the list goes on and on. But these are details that, while occasionally overwhelming, can be worked out. The library and the Internet are filled with resources. A couple of books on the subject include "Not Your Mother's Life," by Joan K. Peters, and "The Entrepreneurial Parent," by Paul and Sarah Edwards and Lisa M. Roberts.

I've come to realize that often the biggest impediment to women insisting on alternate work arrangements isn't the availability of those options. It's the lack of confidence to ask for it.

Most men think nothing of asking for a raise, a promotion or an assignment to a particularly high-profile deal. Most women, on the other hand, are too afraid to ask for a new office chair, let alone more money or time off. And this is regardless of skill level, age or relative worth to a firm.

The only solution to this problem, of course, is adopting an attitude of self-confidence bordering on the delusional. It doesn't have to be permanent, mind you, just long enough to formulate a proposal and present it to your boss.

And all one has to do to adopt this sense of delusional self-confidence is ask one question: What would a guy do?